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SUBJECT: URIBE SIGNALS THAT HE MAY NOT RUN IN 2010

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: President Uribe has signaled he may drop his effort to amend the constitution to allow for a 2010 reelection bid, but his intentions remain unclear. A respected Medellin daily reported January 29 that Uribe would not seek reelection in 2010, and Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos told the Ambassador on January 23 that Uribe told him that he would not proceed with the 2010 reelection effort. The political and practical hurdles to amending the Constitution to permit a 2010 run are also increasing with Uribe's congressional coalition divided and the clock running. Still, Presidential Communications Director Jorge Eastman said Uribe considers the field of potential Uribista candidates to be weak, adding that Uribe shifted into "campaign mode" in January. Current law does not provide for a multiple-party primary to select a unified Uribista candidate, and, without direct intervention by Uribe, the would-be Uribista candidates do not appear ready to sacrifice their aspirations to achieve coalition unity. End Summary.

Uribe Begins To Show Doubts

12. (C) Since mid-January, President Uribe has begun to show doubts over pursuing an immediate third term. Without citing specific sources, Medellin daily El Colombiano reported January 29 that Uribe would not seek reelection in 2010. Defense Minister Santos told the Ambassador on January 23 that Uribe told him two days earlier that he would not push a constitutional reform to allow him to run in the 2010 presidential race. Santos also said that Uribe informed him that Santos was Uribe's personal preference to succeed him, but that he would support whoever won the backing of the Uribe coalition. Uribe also said he would allow his supporters to proceed with legislation that would permit him to seek reelection in 2014. Colombian Ambassador to the United Kingdom Noemi Sanin told the Ambassador the same day she does not believe Uribe will run. Citing palace sources, leading daily El Tiempo reported on January 26 that Uribe would drop his 2010 reelection effort if the Uribe coalition agreed on a single candidate.

13. (C) Presidential Communications Director Eastman told us January 27 that he believes Uribe has not yet made a final decision on reelection. Uribe intervened at the last minute on December 16 to keep the 2010 reelection referendum alive, because he felt that suffering a defeat at the hands of Cambio Radical leader and renegade Uribe coalition member German Vargas Lleras would undercut his capacity to govern.

His intervention did not signal a definitive Uribe decision to pursue a 2010 bid. Eastman said Uribe recognizes the legacy and political costs of pursuing reelection in 2010, and met recently with Santos and U Party Senator Marta Lucia Ramirez to discuss the presidential campaign. Still, he said Uribe remains unconvinced by the field of Uribista presidential contenders, adding that Uribe shifted into "campaign mode" in early January. Former Liberal Party Senator Rodrigo Rivera, who has built close ties with Uribe over the last six months, told us Uribe is still considering his options for 2010 and 2014.

A "Unity" Candidate

¶4. (C) Despite Uribe's indications that he will not push for reelection in 2010 if there is a Uribista "unity" candidate, he has done little to press the Uribista coalition parties or candidates to agree on a mechanism to choose a single candidate. Eastman told us Uribe encourages possible successors to start building their own public identities, but added that the uncertainty about Uribe's intentions inhibits them from doing so. The leading coalition parties--U Party, Conservative Party and Cambio Radical--previously discussed choosing a coalition candidate, but Vargas Lleras has broken with the coalition over the reelection issue, and the Conservative Party is defining its own candidate and coalition options. A meeting of Uribe coalition parties called by Senator Ramirez on January 28 to discuss possible modalities for selecting a unified candidate decided to ask Uribe to clarify his stance on reelection.

¶5. (C) Current law does not provide for a mechanism to hold a multi-party primary to choose a unified coalition candidate. The Political Reform Act pending in Congress would allow such an option, but the bill still needs to pass four more congressional votes and a review by the Constitutional Court before it becomes law. Other options for selecting a coalition candidate include using opinion polls and inter-party negotiations. Still, Eastman told us that the various Uribista contenders would prefer to take their chances in a presidential first round rather than give up their aspirations in a coalition process. He said that unless Uribe forces such a mechanism, it is unlikely the Uribista parties will agree on a consensus candidate.

Leading Uribista Candidates

¶6. (C) Meanwhile, the various Uribista presidential contenders continue to maneuver. Santos views himself as the leading Uribista candidate, but Rodrigo Rivera, Noemi Sanin, Marta Lucia Ramirez, Agricultural Minister Andres Arias, former Justice and Interior Minister Carlos Holguin, and others also harbor presidential dreams. Eastman told us that Arias will soon resign his ministerial post to launch his presidential bid, but said Arias' main goal is to position himself within the Conservative Party. He realizes his presidential prospects are slim. Sanin told the Ambassador that all Uribista candidates will support Uribe's democratic security policy. The election will be fought and won on social and economic issues, and she believes she is better positioned than any other Uribista candidate to win on this terrain.

¶7. (C) Despite the efforts of some U Party members to enlist former Medellin Mayor and independent Sergio Fajardo as their standard bearer, Fajardo told us he will not criticize Uribe but believes it is in his electoral interest to maintain his distance from the President. Presidential advisor Jose Obdulio Gaviria, who will leave government in March to dedicate himself to journalism and campaign work, also dismissed the prospect that Fajardo could become the Uribe candidate, noting that Fajardo is not committed to Uribe's security policy. Eastman said Vargas Lleras will likely try to link up with the opposition Liberal Party and more moderate elements of the Polo Democratic Party to back his presidential campaign.

Is 2010 Still A Practical Option?

¶8. (SBU) While Uribe continues to consider his options, the clock is running on the initiatives to amend the Constitution to enable him to run in 2010. The referendum bill approved by Congress in December would allow for reelection in 2014, not 2010, and it is unclear whether the Senate can amend it (and whether Uribe has the votes to do so) to permit a 2010 bid. Even if the Senate amends the legislation, the referendum will require Constitutional Court approval and the holding of the referendum by November. (Note: Under current law, a sitting president must declare his intention to seek reelection at least six months (i.e. November) before the elections in May.) At least 25% of registered voters (approximately 7.1 million) must participate for the referendum to be valid--a figure that will not be easy to reach given traditional voter apathy and polls showing falling support for reelection.

¶9. (SBU) If the referendum initiative flounders, Uribe supporters may try to reintroduce a 2010 reelection article which was removed from the Political Reform bill by the Senate last year. This will be difficult given coalition divisions and questions regarding Congress' legitimacy due to the parapolitical scandal. The only other alternative would be to introduce a new bill to amend the Constitution, a process which would require eight congressional votes and which has not even begun.

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